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Out-of-control bingo needs a tough cop

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Bingo parlors in Hampton Roads should be cleaned up or shut down.

Thirty years ago, Virginia legalized bingo games run by non-profit organizations for a single reason: to raise money for public-spirited community work.

The wagering was justified as a harmless means to a worthy end. On the whole, it has been a success. Millions have been raised for worthwhile projects and programs.

But every four or five years, temptation, like insidious Bermuda grass, overwhelms the best intentions of well-meaning volunteers. Typically, the state jumps in and trims back the creeping offenders, but without ever eradicating them.

Now they're back again, but so thick, dense and corrupting as to jeopardize the charitable mission of the bingo law.

An in-depth report on Sunday by staff writer Bill Burke makes a persuasive case that many organizations with bingo games have become servants for a thriving gaming industry.

Bingo parlors are generating mountains of cash each night. But far too much is finding its way into the wrong pockets. Burke found that in 2003, some 115 bingo games in Hampton Roads reported receipts of \$100 million.

Where's the bingo money going? Not to the charities.

Only a dime of every reported dollar was put back into community good works. The actual amount is almost certainly much less. Through ineptness or dishonesty, state auditors found that nearly half of the community organizations low-balled the amount wagered in their games.

Even the most scrupulously managed games rarely return 15 percent to their civic activities because jackpots and expenses have gotten so high. Fewer than half of the 115 games gave back as much money as they were required to.

This raises an unavoidable question: If only half are donating the money they are required to by law, then isn't it time to reconsider how the rules can be changed to restore bingo to its original purpose? Without a charitable windfall, bingo is nothing more than back door gambling and should be dealt with that way.

The stench is getting so bad — and the rewards so small — that some organizations, such as the Boys & Girls Clubs of South Hampton Roads, have given up their permits for fear of having their reputations tainted. Good for them.

State regulators and prosecutors are not standing idly by. Since May, two of the region's biggest games have been shut down. The president of a gymnastics organization has been charged with stealing \$35,000 in bingo money from the game her organization ran. More than a dozen investigations are under way statewide.

Abuse is so rampant that the state's top bingo cop, Clyde E. Cristman, said, "I can only imagine how many Cadillacs have been bought out of gaming funds." Cristman is perhaps the only reason for optimism. He's been

on the job only a year, yet he has moved aggressively against the slipshod games and the scam artists.

But Cristman is fighting a losing battle. He lacks the auditors and investigators to keep bingo honest, honorable and harmless. He is allowed but one part-time investigator to police the games in Hampton Roads, the state's bingo capital.

If state leaders are interested in helping community organizations continue to do good work throughout the commonwealth, then they should give Cristman the tools he needs to clean up and clean out the bingo parlors.

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